PRSA Environmental Section

Conflict Resolution: Building Relationships with Adversarial Publics

Brookhaven National Laboratory
A Case Study

submitted by

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Introduction

Crisis often legitimizes change and provides opportunities to move swiftly in new and promising directions. This was and is certainly true at the U.S. Department of Energy's Brookhaven National Laboratory. Following a major community crisis that threatened its existence and a change of management, the Laboratory has made the organizational improvements and built the communications infrastructure that has dramatically improved its relationships with stakeholders.

The community is now an active participant in Laboratory decision-making and Laboratory employees and community members have a better understanding of one another. The ultimate decision-makers, of course, are the Laboratory Director, a senior management team and the Department of Energy, but the community influences many of the Laboratory's decisions and has made the Laboratory richer as a result.

Why effective management of the public trust portfolio is important

Building and maintaining trust with internal and external constituencies is strongly correlated to organizational success and effectiveness. L.Grunig, J. Grunig and Ehling (1992) reviewed literature on characteristics of successful relationships with affected and interested stakeholders and concluded that the following are most important " reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding".(1) Vercic and J. Grunig (1995) went one step further when they related the concept of trust to theories of economics and strategic management and pointed out that trust is the characteristic that allows organizations to exist.(2) A new study by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), "Measuring Organizational Trust: A Diagnostic Survey and International Indicator" finds that trust inside organizations directly impacts profits, innovation and organizational survival. Conducted by Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Ph.D., Kathleen Ellis, Ph.D. and Ruggero Cesaria, the study shows that the ability of an organization to create social capital among diverse communities is a strong indicator of organizational effectiveness.(3)

What events led to public mistrust of Brookhaven National Laboratory

Brookhaven National Laboratory operates large science research facilities, which are available to university, industrial and government personnel for basic and applied research in physical, biomedical, and environmental sciences and selected energy technologies. This world-class science is conducted and supported by over 3,000 employees and 4,500 facility users.

In 1989, the Laboratory was added to the federal superfund list because of historical chemical and waste management practices, and on-site soil and groundwater contamination, some of which occurred prior to 1947 when the site was a U.S. Army camp. In 1996, plumes of volatile organic compounds were discovered off-site, and the Department of Energy notified neighbors in the area that they were to be connected to public water as a precautionary measure, frightening and outraging the community. Then in 1997, a small amount of radioactive tritium was found in groundwater monitoring wells, on Laboratory property south of one of its nuclear research reactors. This finding followed years of repeated requests by a local health agency that the Laboratory install and test wells in that location. The tritium, it was later determined, originated from the reactor's spent fuel pool and had gone undetected for approximately twelve years.

The reaction from community members, activist groups, elected officials and the Department of Energy was immediate and intense. Concerns were raised about the Laboratory's ability to take its environmental stewardship, safety and health responsibilities seriously, and the DOE's competence as an overseer of the Laboratory's operations was questioned.

The community's outrage and desire for up-to-the-minute information overwhelmed the Laboratory. The failure to supply timely information was perceived by many in the community as arrogance, the desire to cover up damaging information, or just plain incompetence. Although the Laboratory's neighbors understood and appreciated some of the Laboratory's contributions to science, activist organizations used the Laboratory's past environmental practices, and failure to build trust with key stakeholders to question whether it should be allowed to continue its scientific mission.

At the time, the Office of Public Affairs (OPA) reported to the Assistant Deputy Lab Director, had little or no access to the Laboratory Director (a position analogous to a CEO), and was hamstrung by a budget that was seriously inadequate to meet the challenges at hand. Laboratory community relations and environmental communications were separate functions reporting to different managers and neither was connected either by line or function to OPA.

Political issues also played a large role in the Lab's problems. Because of community concern and outrage, local and state elected officials established multiple community and political oversight committees, which created an extremely complex and often conflicting set of demands upon the Laboratory. Most important, under pressure from activist organizations and local politicians, the Department of Energy terminated its contract with the former managing contractor, which had managed the Laboratory since its inception in 1947. The DOE also reorganized its field and operations offices and started to manage Laboratory operations from Washington, DC.

How a crisis was turned into an opportunity

Strategy

The Laboratory adopted a multi-faceted strategy to begin to turn its reputation around. The Laboratory directed its efforts to identifying community members who were interested or affected by its operations and activities and then focused on improving its communications with them. The intent was to respond vigorously in an open, non-defensive, accurate and timely way to community inquiries and concerns by implementing several communications infrastructure improvements:

- A commitments and correspondence tracking system was put in place to ensure that all inquiries coming to the Laboratory were logged and assigned to a senior manager, who was responsible for responding within seven working days.

- A Community Involvement Management System was also developed to capture stakeholder comments, inquiries and feedback, assign follow-up actions to middle and senior managers and to track the Laboratory's response.

- The Laboratory also made sure that all relevant reports, correspondence, fact sheets and data of interest to the community were included on its Web site.

Most important, Laboratory management made a commitment to changing the culture of the Laboratory from one of informing to one of involving the community in issues of interest to them, and measuring the effectiveness of its communications programs.

Simultaneously, the Laboratory continued to communicate its scientific accomplishments to the broader scientific community and the public to avoid having its achievements and world-class research overshadowed by environmental problems.

Commitment of Lab Director and management team

Brookhaven Science Associates (BSA), a partnership between two well-respected institutions, Battelle Memorial Institute and Stony Brook University, competed for and won the contract to manage the Laboratory marking the beginning of culture change. Dr. John Marburger, who had served as president of Stony Brook University for fourteen years and who had built significant

credibility with many opponents of the Laboratory, was selected as Laboratory Director by BSA. Understanding the need to improve communications, the Director made a firm commitment to organizational transparency. Communications were to be open, swift and complete; there was to be full disclosure of the benefits and consequences of Laboratory activities in a manner that could be understood and used by the community; and he made a personal commitment to listen to the diverse voices of the constituencies interested in the Laboratory. Although the Director made clear that the ultimate responsibility and authority for decision-making lied with him and those responsible for Laboratory operations within DOE, he invited community input into the Laboratory's decision-making processes and routinely discussed with the community how their feedback was considered and why it was or was not incorporated in the ultimate decision.

Integrating the community relations and communications functions

An essential step on the road to effective communications was the integration of all community relations and communications functions at the Laboratory in one directorate that reports to the Laboratory Director. The head of this directorate, Community Involvement, Government & Public Affairs, is a member of the Laboratory's senior management policy-making team. Furthermore, community relations and communications issues are incorporated into Laboratory-wide organizational management and strategic planning.

Performance Measures

As soon as Brookhaven Science Associates officially began to manage the Laboratory on March 1, 1998, it became clear to Lab employees that the management team shared a strong commitment to excellence in science, environment, safety, and health, and communications. Both Battelle Memorial Institute and Stony Brook University placed senior experienced managers in each one of these areas, believing that their individual and collective success was critical to the Laboratory. BSA managers and the Department of Energy negotiated a comprehensive and somewhat daunting set of performance measures for each of the three areas and BSA's management fee was contingent on achieving excellence in each one.

As part of its contractual obligation to improve its relationship with the community, the Laboratory was and is required to identify and incorporate best public relations practices into its programs; provide evidence of organizational and cultural change regarding community involvement; demonstrate that stakeholders have a better understanding of its science mission, and provide evidence that target audiences are satisfied with the results of its programs.

Instituting Culture Change

Underpinning the Laboratory's community involvement program is a community involvement policy and plan developed with input from internal and external stakeholders. Both the policy and plan lay the foundation for Laboratory-wide communications and community involvement activities. To ensure that the Laboratory management is aware of community issues and is actively engaged with the community, responsibility for community involvement is built into every manager's job description and annual performance evaluation. Additionally, a formal policy, plan and set of procedures for Laboratory-wide community involvement have been developed with the input of employees and managers across the Lab and members of the community. The procedures include a checklist to help managers identify if there is a need for community involvement while planning projects. A handbook was also developed to provide how-to instructions so managers could identify and address the need for community involvement.

Community involvement professionals participate on teams, which are formed for each issue or decision the community has or is likely to have a stake in. The staffers provide guidance and direction to ensure community involvement plans are written and implemented, that managers are prepared to interact with community members, and that issues are effectively prioritized so that the community is not overwhelmed.

Baseline Survey & stakeholder interviews

A formal research survey was conducted in the Fall of 1998 to determine public confidence in the Laboratory, how stakeholders obtained and preferred to receive information about the Laboratory, and what the Laboratory could do differently to improve its relationships with the community. The survey results showed that the public's trust in the Laboratory was seriously eroded: 60% of respondents associated the Laboratory with environmental concerns (e.g., groundwater contamination). Forty-nine percent did not trust the Laboratory's management to do the right thing, and 60% said the Laboratory did not provide timely information. Fortunately for the Laboratory and the new management, most of those surveyed did not want to see the Laboratory closed down and a majority viewed the Laboratory as a significant contributor to the local economy. The survey also indicated that the community trusted information it received directly from neighbors who were Laboratory employees more than any other source.

Community Advisory Council

Because of the intensity of community distrust towards the Laboratory and the Department of Energy, the Laboratory and DOE agreed to create an independent

community advisory group with the assistance of an oversight panel that included elected officials and regulators on a federal, state and local level, and community representatives.

The Community Advisory Council (CAC), which is composed of 32 diverse members and 24 alternates, meets monthly to advise the Laboratory Director on policy issues and projects of concern or interest to them or to the Laboratory. Organizations represented on the CAC include: civic, union, employee, facility users, activist, environmental, health, education and business. The CAC applies a decision-making process for development of consensus on Lab issues. Moving towards its third birthday, the CAC has invested the time and effort needed to tackle some tough technical issues and become problem solvers instead of issue raisers. It has been instrumental in bringing attention to the need for more money to accelerate environmental cleanup and is exhibiting a growing interest in the Laboratory's science mission. A major reason for the CAC's success is strong management commitment. The Laboratory Director participates in the CAC's monthly meetings and other Laboratory and DOE managers provide timely information to CAC members and work with them to develop and implement mutually acceptable decisions.

Stakeholder working groups and task forces

Recognizing that there are different publics or interested stakeholders for every issue, other public forums are also being used to continuously reach out to stakeholders likely to be interested or concerned about an issue or project. For example, a chartered working group meets to give input on plans for decommissioning and decontaminating the Laboratory's Graphite Research Reactor, the first nuclear research reactor built for the peaceful use of the atom. Working group members are committed to following this process for two years and advising on issues from transportation to the final disposition of the graphite core. By meeting monthly with managers responsible for the project, the working group sees first-hand how their input is being considered

Over the last year, the Laboratory has been working with a stakeholder task force to solicit community input on developing a site master plan. Builders, developers, elected officials, representatives from civic and environmental groups, employees, and agencies such as the New York State Department of Transportation, to name a few, participated in a series of roundtables. The Laboratory sought to ensure it was cognizant of issues important to the community, and of the plans that were already in place by outside groups and agencies. Each of the concerns and recommendations were addressed in the plan and in some cases significant changes were made to the draft document to reflect stakeholder input.

Moreover, project and issue-specific community roundtables, workshops, task forces and working groups are routinely organized to inform and to obtain input from stakeholders on cleanup alternatives, environmental management initiatives and existing and planned medical, energy and environmental research.

Community Outreach

Approximately 75% of Laboratory employees live within a ten-mile radius of the Laboratory and are involved in local community and civic groups. Because the baseline stakeholder survey indicated that the community members preferred to receive information directly from Laboratory employees, the Laboratory initiated and enhanced community involvement programs that used employees to reach out to the community.

The Laboratory developed a stakeholder relations program aimed at building and maintaining relationships with targeted community leaders and systematically collecting and responding to feedback from them**.** Employees volunteer and are trained to contact these stakeholders routinely to be sure that the Laboratory is providing adequate information on issues in which they have an interest.

The Laboratory encourages employees to participate in an envoy program intended to build close relationships with community groups. Envoys serve as conduits between the Laboratory and organizations where they have established relationships.

Additionally, more than 30,000 students and visitors participate in the Laboratory's science education programs, visit the Lab's science museum or attend open houses and participate in tours each year.

Measuring effectiveness

An essential part of the Laboratory's commitment to excellence in communications and community involvement is measuring program effectiveness. Program evaluations run the gamut from the informal, comment cards and evaluation sheets to more formal surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

This past year, the Laboratory decided that it was too early to update its 1998 baseline survey, and instead conducted three smaller, more targeted surveys. They included an "interested stakeholder" survey, which was aimed at community members who expressed an interest in the Lab. These stakeholders ranged from people on the Lab's mailing lists to those who actively participated in one or more Lab-sponsored events, community task forces or workshops. Surveys were also developed for use with members of the Community Advisory

Council to determine their satisfaction with the Laboratory's level of administrative support, presentation quality, meeting facilitation and the resources provided to help them understand issues of mutual interest. Laboratory managers were also surveyed regarding their understanding of the Laboratory's community outreach, education and community involvement programs and asked how they would rank these programs in terms of their value to the Laboratory.

The results of the "Interested Stakeholder" Survey (33% response rate) indicated that a majority of stakeholders interviewed had confidence that Laboratory management was competent, committed to open communications and willing to correct the mistakes of the past. Over 90% had confidence in the Laboratory's ability to do science. More than 67% of the Community Advisory Council members and alternates who responded to the survey (69% response rate) rated satisfaction with the Laboratory and the CAC very high. Finally Laboratory managers were unanimous in their belief that the Laboratory's relationships with the community have improved and over 60% identified educational programs, tours and open houses as the most valuable community programs.

As we learned through these efforts, some effective public relations programs and activities intended to prevent a problem are difficult to assess because they are designed to produce a non-event; when they are effective something does not occur. In other cases, good results may be obtained, but because of a multiplicity of variables, it is hard to point to excellent public relations as the reason.

Peer Review

The Laboratory with the participation and agreement of Department of Energy established a peer review process to help evaluate the effectiveness of its programs and to ensure that it is using best practices in planning and implementing its communications programs. The peers include top-level public relations and community involvement experts from outside the Laboratory in the areas of academe, industry and government.

Path Forward

Using feedback from its stakeholder relations and other community relations programs, the Laboratory is developing an issues anticipation program that will be tied to its institutional planning process. With the help of its peer review team, the Laboratory also intends to make research, particularly relationship measurement and outcomes testing, a major part of its communications and community relations programs.

The Laboratory will continue to support the Community Advisory Council. As the CAC matures, it is expected to exercise a greater role in shaping Laboratory

decisions, in advocating for Lab issues of mutual interest and in providing a forum where policy issues can be discussed.

Conclusion

The Laboratory has been the major beneficiary of its improved relationships with the community. Laboratory programs and projects are more likely to be implemented on time and on budget, the culture of the Lab has been enriched, and the community is working in partnership with the Laboratory to obtain much needed funds for Laboratory environmental management and research programs.

Work Cited

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